

# 12 REASONS TO HAVE A LABYRINTH AT YOUR UNIVERSITY

by Robert Ferré, president, Labyrinth Enterprises, LLC

For the past two decades, labyrinths have been undergoing a vibrant revival in English- and German-speaking countries. We at Labyrinth Enterprises, LLC, have built labyrinths for churches, hospitals, public parks, retreat centers, and schools of all levels, from grade schools to universities. For each venue, the applications vary. The following 12 reasons apply to universities. They are the author's opinion after more than a decade of making labyrinths, lecturing, and conducting trainings.

## 1 The labyrinth is a generic spiritual tool

The labyrinth is an ideal spiritual tool, which can be used to reach people who don't relate to specific religious institutions or traditions, or in a setting in which there is a diversity of beliefs. Why is it spiritual? Because it leads within, thereby enhancing understanding which is of a spiritual nature. Many traditions advise the seeker to go inside to find truth. The outer world is one of smoke and mirrors, illusion, appearances. Truth must be found by going within. Once found, it is universal – it is not that individual person's truth, but rather, *the* truth, which applies universally to everyone. It is not immediately obvious, but the journey which is the most personal is at the same time the most universal. The labyrinth can provide a spiritual experience that is personal, generic, and meaningful.

## 2 The labyrinth is traditional

Labyrinths go back 5,000 years or more. They incorporate many levels of symbolism within their sacred geometry. For example, circularity and concentric circles reflect the cosmos, atoms, DNA, and eternity. Sacred geometry adopts the same principles of manifestation utilized by the Creator in manifesting the physical universe, as discovered during thousands of years of investigation and observation through the study of nature. In our modern world, we have lost touch with our origins, our roots, even our true identity. The labyrinth is a bridge that connects us to the past, to a long-forgotten and ancient part of ourselves that dates back to a world lit only by fire, when we knew the cycles of nature, the seasons, and the movements of the sky. That's why walking a labyrinth touches some people very deeply, often in ways they can't verbalize, as the context itself is unfamiliar. In today's commercial world, designers like to invent a new pattern and claim it as their own. For millennia, our ancestors did just the opposite, creating traditional patterns so that they could be identified with and connected to all of those who had come before them, and will come after. Being part of an ancient tradition is not a common experience in today's world. Especially for students and faculty dealing with the latest updates in technology and academic developments, entering into an ancient practice can awaken not *new* vistas and possibilities, but *old* ones, archetypal ones.



Valparaiso University, Indiana

### 3 The labyrinth is contemporary

There is scant record of how labyrinths were originally used. A few sources identify labyrinths with the spring equinox, rebirth and fertility, resurrection and Easter. For the most part, we have been forced to determine our own paradigm to serve our modern needs. It is probable that labyrinths were once used only in special circumstances for rituals involving a select few privileged or initiated participants. On the other hand, today the labyrinth is democratic, available to anyone who wants to walk it. The Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress, one of the pioneers in the labyrinth movement, writes: "The labyrinth is truly a tool for our times. It can help us find our way through the bewildering multiplicity, to the unity of source. The labyrinth is an evocative experience. The labyrinth provides the sacred space where the inner and outer worlds can commune, where the thinking mind and imaginative heart can flow together. It can provide a space to listen to our inner voice of wisdom and come to grips with our role in humankind's next evolutionary step."

### 4 The labyrinth is physical

The labyrinth embodies our experience, keeping it from being just theoretical or mental. Someone said that bodies can synthesize what the head can only distinguish. Saint Augustine is often quoted as having written, "It is solved by walking." Labyrinth walking has been called the laying on of feet. One of the most noticeable effects of walking the labyrinth is stress reduction. We can feel the difference in our physical bodies. Stress kills, while the reduction of stress heals. Providing a proactive way to deal with the stress of being a student or faculty member or campus worker is one of the greatest gifts of the labyrinth. Being physical, the labyrinth is anchored in time and space, just as we are. There is nothing theoretical about it. As a labyrinth maker, I know the importance of the physical traits of a labyrinth, namely its pattern, size, location, and orientation. Yet, at the same time, we don't actually walk on the lines of the labyrinth pattern, we walk in the empty space between them. Similarly, the benefits are more than just exercise or going for a walk. It is clear that the physical aspects lead beyond themselves, guiding us to a non-physical experience. You might say labyrinths organize us, making order out of chaos.



*Redlands University, California*

### 5 Outdoor labyrinths add another dimension

There is an attraction to outdoor activities. Nature adds a refreshing and rejuvenating quality of fresh air, blue sky, drifting clouds, gathering leaves. Getting out of the classroom or library for a few moments of deep breaths and focused walking can add to one's clarity and energy level. Walking the labyrinth outdoors, one experiences a range of circumstances and weather, from hot to cold, dry or rainy, day or night. It has great variety, just like life. Spending time indoors, we lose contact with the turning of the leaves, the freshness of the air, the smell of approaching storms. Walking an outdoor labyrinth incorporates these aspects of nature to enhance our experience, available 24 hours a day.

## 6 Labyrinth walking is a spiritual practice

Spirituality requires attention, hence, a category of activities known as spiritual practice. Walking a labyrinth is such a practice, making spirituality more accessible. It is a form of personal meditation and devotion which improves and deepens with practice. The labyrinth takes us beyond our limited, conditioned personality to a deeper place of awareness and revelation. Lauren Artress was worried when she first began using labyrinths. It was clear that they were powerful, but to what end? Could labyrinths be too much? Could they overwhelm? Could they injure people? She reports, "After months of walking the labyrinth and listening to the experiences of others, I began to trust the labyrinth." She goes on to describe her discovery as having faith in the process, which I take to be the same as trusting the spiritual practice. I believe that the labyrinth meets each person where they are and helps them to take the next step on their spiritual path. With tools, even spiritual tools, expertise comes best through practice. The results are cumulative.

## 7 The labyrinth is a form of pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is an outer journey with an inner purpose. It takes us away from the routine of daily life to sacred places where the veil seems thinner and spirit more accessible. The labyrinth does this. It engages us in spiritual travel. Some call it a quest. Pilgrimage is a tradition in most religions, from sitting in front of the grotto in Lourdes to circling the Kaaba in Mecca. Every year, thousands walk to Santiago de Compostella. Some books say that medieval labyrinths were substitute pilgrimage destinations when it was too difficult or dangerous to go to Jerusalem. We don't know that to be a fact, but I do think the labyrinth is a form of pilgrimage in its own right, not as a substitute. Being on a spiritual journey is the perfect metaphor and image for both life and the labyrinth. The labyrinth is the threshold between the physical and the metaphysical ("meta" means "beyond," in this case, beyond the physical), between the outer and the inner worlds. Reaching and experiencing this threshold is the essence of pilgrimage.



*Depauw University, Indiana*

## 8 The labyrinth is a blank slate

While there are some established traditional uses of labyrinths, each one starts as a blank slate. As such, it can be used for a wide variety of purposes. Those who have a religious preference, can use the labyrinth consistent with that preference. Instead of generic meditation, it can be prayer, or the repetition of a mantra, or the request for guidance. The labyrinth is ideal for rituals and ceremonies of all kinds, from butterfly releases to weddings to memorial services to walks for AIDS awareness. Walking a labyrinth offers a visible action in support of an ideal, such as world peace or equal rights. A tool is neutral. You can use a hammer to build a garage or a chapel or a bar. The tool must be paired with an objective and an intent. The final result comes mostly from the user, and not so much from the tool. Walking labyrinths can be used to resolve conflict, solve problems, or enhance creativity. The labyrinth is especially effective in dealing with grief. There is a large body of anecdotal evidence that reports healing from walking labyrinths, physical, emotional, and psychological. Labyrinths are also great for celebration and expressions of joy. It is popular to hold labyrinth walks to mark full moons or the solstices or equinoxes. Some labyrinth walkers usher in the new year at midnight on New Year's Eve. The only account from the Middle Ages is a dance on the labyrinth at Easter time amongst the canons (priests at a cathedral). There are books about labyrinth ceremonies.

## 9 The labyrinth leads us beyond the mind

Every spiritual tradition has some ritual or technique to take us past the barrier of our thinking mind. It is as if we have a crust on the outside, made of our learning, conditioning, and cultural socialization. But there is much more to us, within. The labyrinth leads us to our center, where we may go beyond the limits of the shallow mind. Our daily lives are overloaded with words and images and stimuli. Walking the labyrinth is a non-verbal activity. Rumi, the Sufi poet, suggested that we should spend at least as much time in the invisible world as in the visible. While that may not be a practical balance, it certainly is beneficial to spent time each day with one's non-rational aspects. Lauren Artress writes, "Walking the labyrinth clears the mind and gives insight into the spiritual journey." When I am interviewed by journalists who need brief answers or sound bites, I respond to the question of "how labyrinths work" by pointing out that our lives are lived almost completely on the surface, dealing with personalities, egos, appearances. Labyrinths take us past the surface to a deeper place within which is more authentic and more meaningful.

## 10 The labyrinth builds community

When walking the labyrinth with others, a joining takes place. Even though it is an individual activity, community is formed. On numerous occasions, people have stated to me that they prefer to walk the labyrinth alone, and not be distracted by others. Later, after walking as part of a group, they expressed surprise at how powerful their experience was. The group energy helped to create a space in which the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. The community built by the labyrinth extends beyond walking it together. The labyrinth committee, in overseeing and maintaining the labyrinth, works and trains together, introducing others to the labyrinth, serving as docents. Often the committee is involved in the planning, fund raising, and even construction of the labyrinth. One of the most common observations during the sharing time after a labyrinth walk is the realization that we are all on the same path, even if it looks like people are going in different directions.

Donna Schaper writes, "The labyrinth lets people walk together and separately without agreeing on anything. The very ancient nature of the labyrinth combined with the archetypal metaphor of its design draws us to absolutes that transcend any human constructs that have separated humanity into arbitrary religious categories for centuries." The labyrinth brings us together.



*Community labyrinth in Kearney, NE*

Having a labyrinth is also an effective outreach to the surrounding community at large, for all those who would come to walk it. It is an admirable form of public service.

## 11 The labyrinth promotes listening

Some see prayer as asking and meditation as listening. Certainly one of the great lessons in life is to get out of our own way and to turn things over to guidance from a higher source. Author Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion has written several poetic books about using labyrinths. She has found that the labyrinth has many gifts for us, but to receive them, we must be receptive. We must listen. How else can we know if our supplications have been heard? In one instance that I recall, a labyrinth walker received a clear urge to call her sister, from whom she had been estranged for more than ten years. That evening, when she made the call, her sister replied, "Just today I was thinking that we should resolve our differences. I'm so glad to hear from you." When listening, we can learn. We can discover. While talking or demanding or lecturing or analyzing, we close ourselves off. Within listening there is an element of surrender that takes us out of time and space.

## 12 The labyrinth restores balance

Modern society is quite clearly out of balance. For example, we work too hard (especially students). If nothing else, labyrinths can be a time out, a few minutes away from schedules and lists and obligations. Enlightenment is unlikely to be found in the fast lane. We must slow down. The time walking a labyrinth is a gift we can give to ourselves to help restore calm, renew our priorities, and return to sanity. At a time when our commercial world is highly aggressive and masculine, the labyrinth is feminine and passive; it welcomes us in and embraces us with no demands or prerequisites. Being unicursal with no dead ends, the labyrinth assures us of success amidst the fear of failure. One researcher believes that labyrinths have



Illinois Math and Science Academy

reappeared throughout history at times of spiritual crisis and social change. Amidst the raging seas of innovation and technological advance, the labyrinth serves as ballast, as a gyroscope to keep us upright. Donna Schaper writes, "Walking the labyrinth is not about escaping into the center and leaving the world, it is about experiencing Spirit in the center so that you can live in the world in a more blessed way." In times of illness or injury, labyrinths offer a source for inner healing and transformation. Whereas drugs may promise cures, healing is always an inside job. The labyrinth integrates opposites, joining past and present. Donna Schaper, writes, "One of the key reasons people walk labyrinths today is to have the experience of the simultaneity of past and present. In walking the labyrinth, we link with other cultures and eras. We also link body and soul; we simultaneously have a physical and spiritual experience. We make metaphors work for us. The journey is one foot after another, and it is a path to the holy place inside us."

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